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SUBJECT: REVERSING VLADIVOSTOK'S WATER QUALITY DECLINE

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¶1. (U) Summary. A recent conference in Vladivostok highlighted the seriousness of pollution in the waters off the city's picturesque coastline. Untreated sewage, a lack of pollution controls, and unchecked dumping not only threaten the region's unique wildlife but also its human inhabitants. The pollution is bad, but the conference demonstrated that local authorities are aware of the problem and searching for ways to remedy it. End summary.

¶2. (U) Last week's Marine Ecology 2007 Clean Port Conference highlighted the vast environmental challenges facing Vladivostok but also showed the depth of support for taking action. A year ago the director of the Sea Protection Institute of Vladivostok's Maritime State University declared the city the "most polluted port in the Russian Far East." Sewage has been mostly untreated for the last 35 years, a one-million-ton garbage dump smoldering on the shoreline outside of the city leaches contaminants into the sea, industry continues to dump heavy metals and other contaminants into regional waters, and shipping companies are not required to install pollution controls on their vessels. Yet the high dive towers and swim ladders dotting the city's shoreline are testament to Vladivostok's once pristine waters. Even now, on particularly beautiful summer days, residents frequently disregard the "no swimming" signs and take the plunge.

¶3. (U) The pollution endangers not only humans, but southern Primorye's unique environment as well. The waters around Vladivostok are spawning grounds for salmon, pollock and herring, and the coastline hosts 13 sea bird colonies. As many as 100 species in the area are endangered, including 48 that are unique to Primorye, according to Greenpeace.

¶4. (U) Russian, Japanese, American, Norwegian, and South Korean experts presented over 90 reports at the conference. Scientists said Vladivostok's problems are two-fold: inadequate infrastructure and insufficient enforcement. They posited that Vladivostok's Golden Horn Bay could again be made safe for swimming, but only with the investment of hundreds of millions of rubles and the creation of a single agency responsible for water quality. The conclusions of the conference will not be published for another month, but one paper will suggest that an investment of 30 million rubles per year will significantly improve the health of the bay by the year 2012 -- in time for the APEC summit in Vladivostok.

¶5. (U) Vladivostok's city official say they are aware of the continuing damage that untreated pollution is doing to the environment -- and also the city's potential as a tourist destination. In an earlier conversation with CG, they said that

with federal help they are working to install new waste treatment centers, which should come online soon if they can solve the "not in my backyard" problems. But they acknowledged that one major source of marine pollution, the flow of untreated run-off from the city's streets into the ocean, remains beyond their means to remedy. This run-off is particularly dangerous because it includes chemicals released by crumbling asphalt and other ground pollutants that never make it into the city's sewage system and so cannot be treated, even once treatment centers are running. In order to solve the problem, Vladivostok requires an effective means of channeling surface run-off into the sewage system -- a massive undertaking that would require redesigning many of the city's streets.

¶6. (U) To address the challenge, the conference program included a number of roundtables, including: creation of coastal conservation areas, environmental monitoring, coping with invasive species, oil spill prevention, environmentally-friendly technologies, recycling, resource management, industrial impacts on marine biota, and environmental education. The conference also featured booths for maritime and environmental products, a World Wildlife education booth, and a Foreign Commercial Service (FCS) catalog show highlighting American firms involved in waste management and environmental technology. These firms included Applied Science Associates (analysis of marine, freshwater, air, and land resources); CMC Rescue (specialized rescue equipment); Filtra-Systems (industrial filtration and separation products); Liquid Waste Technology, LLC (dredges and remote control pumps); and SCIENCO/FAST Systems, Inc. (technologies for water treatment, oil/water separation, and reverse osmosis).

¶7. (U) The conference was sponsored by the Sea Protection Institute, Maritime State University, Far Eastern State Technical University, UNESCO, the Russian Academy of Science, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the All Russian Scientific and Research Institute of Nature Protection, and the Primorskiy Kray Administration. Participants included representatives from some major companies that could make a huge impact, for better or

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worse, on the environment, including Rosneft, Sakhalin Energy and Exxon. CG gave welcoming remarks and a television interview congratulating the organizers and commenting that a clean environment is not only a quality of life issue, but is good business as well.

¶8. (U) Pollution problems along Russia's Pacific coast are not restricted to Vladivostok. The rich fishing grounds off the coast of scenic Kamchatka may become a new environmental battleground as testing is revealing the presence of significant offshore petroleum deposits in the region. World Wildlife Fund Kamchatka Director Laura Williams, in town to attend the Clean Port conference, told CG and PolOff that future oil development must be balanced with conservation of the region's environmental resources, as well as preservation of Kamchatka's vital fishing industry. She said that the salmon fishery in particular may be threatened by future drilling, since the waters off the west coast of Kamchatka are vital to young salmon.

¶9. (U) Comment: While new waste treatment plants, environmental legislation, and enforcement are vital, the first step towards improving Vladivostok's dangerous water quality may be instilling a sense of environmental awareness and responsibility in its citizenry. Many visitors to the city are struck by how much litter there is on the streets. Small-scale clean-up campaigns involving schoolchildren are already underway and are an important step, but more must be done. That Vladivostok is set in a picturesque bay is indisputable, but to attract tourists, restore the fishery, and allow local residents to fully enjoy their maritime environment will require a sustained and expensive commitment from government leaders, industry, shipping companies, and local residents and a recognition of what a precious resource they have at their doorstep.  
THOMAS ARMBRUSTER